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ABSTRACT

This lesson from the "Teaching with Historic Places" series is based closely on the National Register of Historic Places nomination file on Attu Battlefield and U.S. Army and Navy Airfields on Attu, a National Historic landmark. Materials for students include: (1) a reading outlining the Japanese occupation and U.S. recapture of Attu; (2) maps indicating the location of the battle sites; and (3) a series of photographs depicting the battle and its aftermath. The lesson could be used in teaching a U.S. history unit on World War II. Students benefit from studying this battlefield because the Battle of Attu was fought on a comprehensible scale and provides an example of the indomitable spirit of soldiers on both sides of World War II fighting for what the believed to be a just cause. Students learn to explain how the Japanese occupation and U.S. recapture of Attu were significant in the history of the Second World War. They can describe the complexity of even a relatively small scale military campaign. In addition students learn to analyze different sources of information relating to a particular historic site. Students can discuss both the valor of the American soldiers, who fought under weather conditions considered among the worst in the world, and the loyalty of the Japanese troops to their emperor and their cause. Activities include researching the battle, examining the entire Pacific campaign, and trying to arrange for veterans who fought in the Aleutians to come to class and speak. Further readings are suggested. (DK)

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Attu: North American Battleground of World War II

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SO 023 504

Teaching with Historic Places

A program of the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places and the National Trust for Historic Preservation

Attu: North American Battleground of World War II

BY FAY METCALF

In early June 1942, Americans had cause both for jubilation and for despair. As they tuned in their radios for news of the war, they heard of the coordinated attacks by the Japanese on the Midway and Aleutian islands. At the Battle of Midway, American planes sunk four Japanese aircraft carriers and destroyed or damaged some 300 planes. But in the Aleutians, the Japanese bombing had been successful, and Japanese forces occupied the islands of Attu, Agattu, and Kiska. This alarmed the American people because it was feared that the enemy would use Attu and other small Aleutian islands as a staging area for attacks on the North American mainland. There was also concern that the occupation might disrupt United States-Siberian communications necessary for the Lend-Lease program to assist the U.S.S.R. The Americans had to regain the Aleutians at all costs. Following a difficult campaign, made more difficult by the weather, the Americans did oust the Japanese from Attu and gain control of the rest of the Aleutians. The islands then were used as a staging point for attacks on Japanese territory.

This lesson is closely based on the National Register of Historic Places nomination file on Attu Battlefield and U.S. Army and Navy Airfields on Attu, a National Historic Landmark. Materials for students include (1) a reading outlining the Japanese occupation and American recapture of Attu, (2) maps indicating the location of the battle sites, and (3) a series of photographs depicting the battle and its aftermath. The lesson could be used in teaching a U.S. history unit on World War II. Students can benefit from studying this battlefield because the Battle of Attu was fought on a comprehensible scale and provides an example of the indomitable spirit of soldiers on both sides of World War II fighting for what they believed to be a just cause.

Objectives for the Students

- To explain how the Japanese occupation and American recapture of Attu were significant in the history of World War II.
- To describe the complexity of even a relatively small-scale military campaign.
- To discuss both the valor of the American soldiers, who fought under weather conditions considered among the worst in the world, and the loyalty of the Japanese troops to their emperor and their cause.
- To analyze different sources of information relating to a particular historic site.

Teaching Activities

Setting the Stage

Explain to the students that the Aleutian Islands form a 1,000-mile chain of islands that arc westward from Alaska. In 1867 the United States acquired the islands, along with Alaska, from Russia. The island chain that includes the Aleutians continues for another 300 miles to the west. These western islands, called the Komandorskis (or Commander Islands), are close to the Kamchatka Peninsula and were part of the Soviet Union in 1942. Although there were bombing raids on other Aleutian islands during World War II, Attu, the westernmost island of the U.S.-held chain, was the site of the only land battle on the North American continent during World War II.

Like the rest of the Aleutians, Attu is composed of volcanic mountains and tundra valleys. The island is approximately 40 miles long and 20 miles wide. Its highest peak rises more than 3,000 feet above sea level. Located between the frigid Bering Sea and the warm Japanese Current of the North Pacific Ocean, the island's waters remain free of ice, but the area is subject to year-round, vicious wind storms known as *williwaws*, and dense, impenetrable fogs. It rains or snows an average of 200 days a year. During the spring—when the battle of Attu was fought—temperatures generally hover around freezing (32° F). Glaciers and snow drifts mark the higher elevations, and lower levels support only spongy tundra and low-growing plants.

Locating the Site

Begin the lesson by having students locate the Aleutian Islands in an atlas or on a large-scale map of the Pacific Ocean (the inset in most textbook maps makes it difficult to understand the location of the islands). Ask the students to note the location of the Aleutians relative to the Kurile Islands off the coast of Japan, as well as their relationship to the Alaskan mainland. Have the students determine the longitude and latitude of Attu and ask how this location would determine the climate of the island. Ask them to compare the location of Attu to where they live and have them estimate the distance from their home town to the island. This exercise will give them some sense of how remote Attu is and the great difficulty the military had in transporting troops, materiel (equipment, supplies, guns, ammunition, aircraft), and landing craft.

Determining the Facts

Attu Battlefield

Provide the students with copies of Map Exhibits 1 and 2 and the Reading. The students should refer to the maps as they read and then answer the following questions:

a. How long did the Japanese occupy Attu?

b. Why did the Japanese stop carrying supplies to Attu by transport ship?

c. How long did the American assault on the island take?

d. What effect did weather have on the battle?

e. What event marked the end of the battle?

f. How many casualties were there on each side? How many American soldiers succumbed to the weather?

g. Describe American activities on the island following the battle.

Briefly review the answers to these questions to make sure all the students understand the facts. Then have the students use the reading to draw up a time line of events, both preceding and during the battle. Using these time lines, the students should then locate the sites of the battle itself on Map Exhibit 2.

Visual Evidence

Provide the students with copies of photos 1–6, explaining that all but one of these were taken by military personnel as an official record of the island campaign. The students should bear in mind that all photographs are a special representation of reality. Because they capture only what was present at one particular second in time, they show only a focused view of any scene; that is, other events could have been taking place near the particular scene that has been recorded, but we cannot tell that from the image in front of us. Furthermore, a particular photograph—the snow scene, for example—may be very difficult to analyze unless we know what to look for. The photographic image makes a statement: it shows us something material, but it also portrays a mood and suggests causal connections and even moral evaluations. As Thomas Schlereth writes in *Artifacts and the American Past* (Nashville: American Association of State and Local History, 1980), "A photograph is a fragment snipped from the film of history." The students are to take such fragments and use them to form an understanding and interpretation of the Battle of Attu.

Ask the students to examine carefully each of the six photographs in turn and then write a few sentences about what they see and what each means. Choose a few students to report on their surmises and encourage general discussion. After the students have had ample

time to present their best judgments, provide them with copies of the photo captions. The ensuing discussion should make the point that photographs can add much to accurate reporting and historical analysis, but only when we have sufficient additional information to help us test and make sense of the image.

Putting It All Together

Students will have gained a good deal of information about the Battle of Attu from this exercise, but they will need help putting it into the chronology of World War II or the context of Americans at war.

Activity 1: Setting the Context

Have the students first check their own history textbooks to see if Attu or the Aleutian Islands are mentioned. They then choose one of the following assignments:

- Research the Battle of Attu more fully and make a report to the class.
- Examine the entire war in the Pacific to better understand the particular role the Battle of Attu played in the full campaign.
- Call veterans' groups in the community and try to arrange for members who fought in the Aleutians to come to class and speak about their personal experiences.

Activity 2: The Local Impact of World War II

The students investigate their own region to see how it was affected by World War II. If there were active military bases, they might find out where the armed forces who trained there were sent. They might also check to see if local factories were engaged in war work. If these bases or factories no longer exist, the students could find out what is now located on the sites. Local papers published during the 1940s are good sources both for information and photographs. These can usually be found in the archives of public libraries or in the morgue of the newspaper office. Senior citizen centers are good places to conduct interviews about how the military base or factory affected the local community.

Activity 3: War and the Individual

Encourage students to invite a veteran of Desert Storm to visit the classroom to describe another military engagement where climate and logistical problems played a very large role. After the presentation, have students discuss similarities and differences between the two battles. Then ask them to write an essay on the role of the ordinary soldier (both American and Japanese) during the crisis of war.

Further Reading

Useful sources are Stan Cohen, *The Forgotten War*, vols. 1 and 2 (Missoula, Mont.: Pictorial Histories Publishing Co., 1981 and 1988); John Cloe, *The Aleutian Warriors* (Missoula, Mont.: Pictorial Histories Publishing Co., 1990); and Jim Reardon's fictionalized but informative *Castner's Cutthroats, Saga of the Alaska Scouts* (Prescott, Ariz.: Wolfe Publishing, 1990). Personal accounts may also be found in *The Capture of Attu, Tales of World War II in Alaska* (Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing Co., 1984).

Visiting the Site

Attu is in a very remote and inaccessible location and military clearance is required to visit it. More information is available from the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, Aleutian Islands Unit, Box 5251, NAS FPO, Seattle, Washington 98791.

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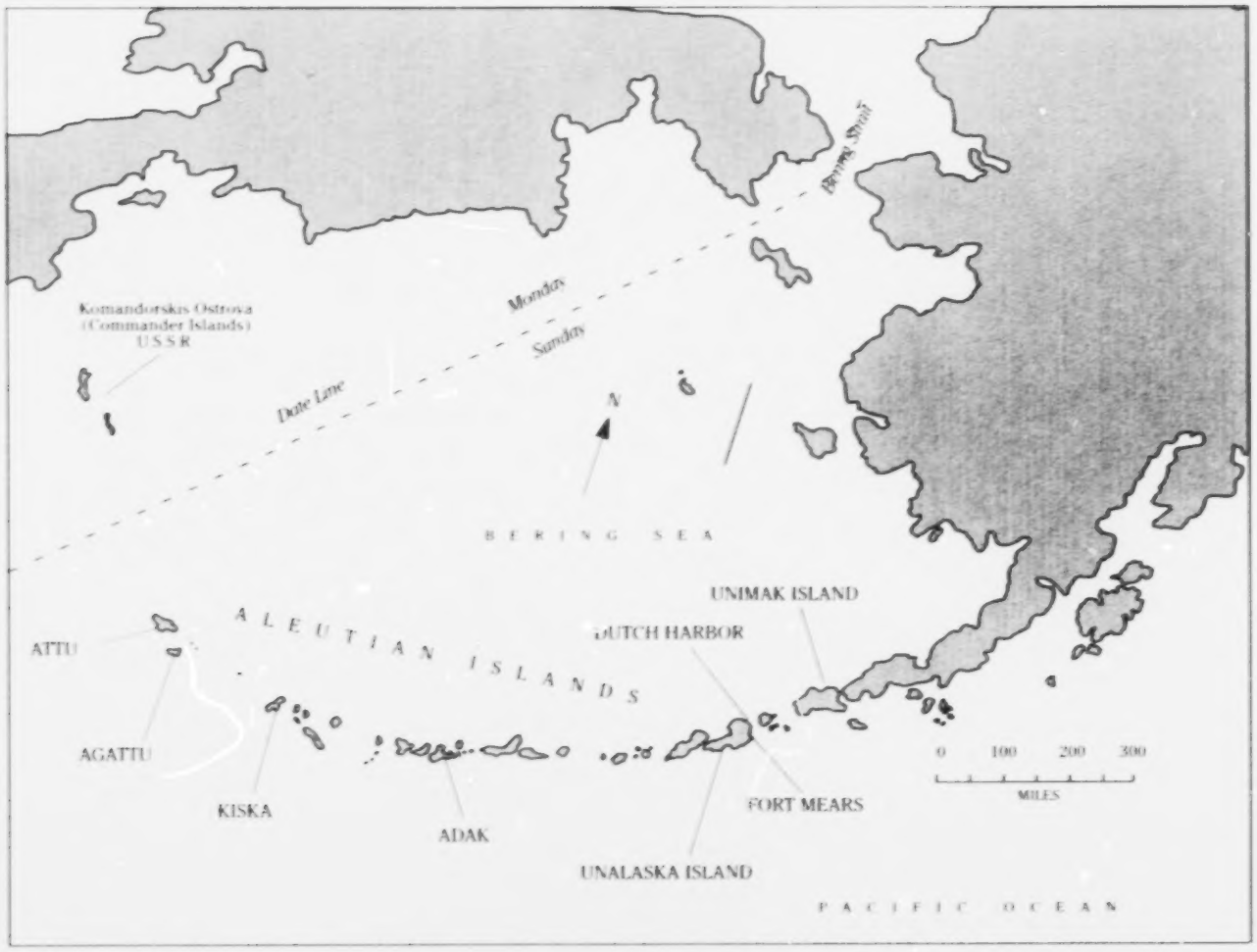
Map Exhibit 1



Bering Sea and the Aleutian Islands

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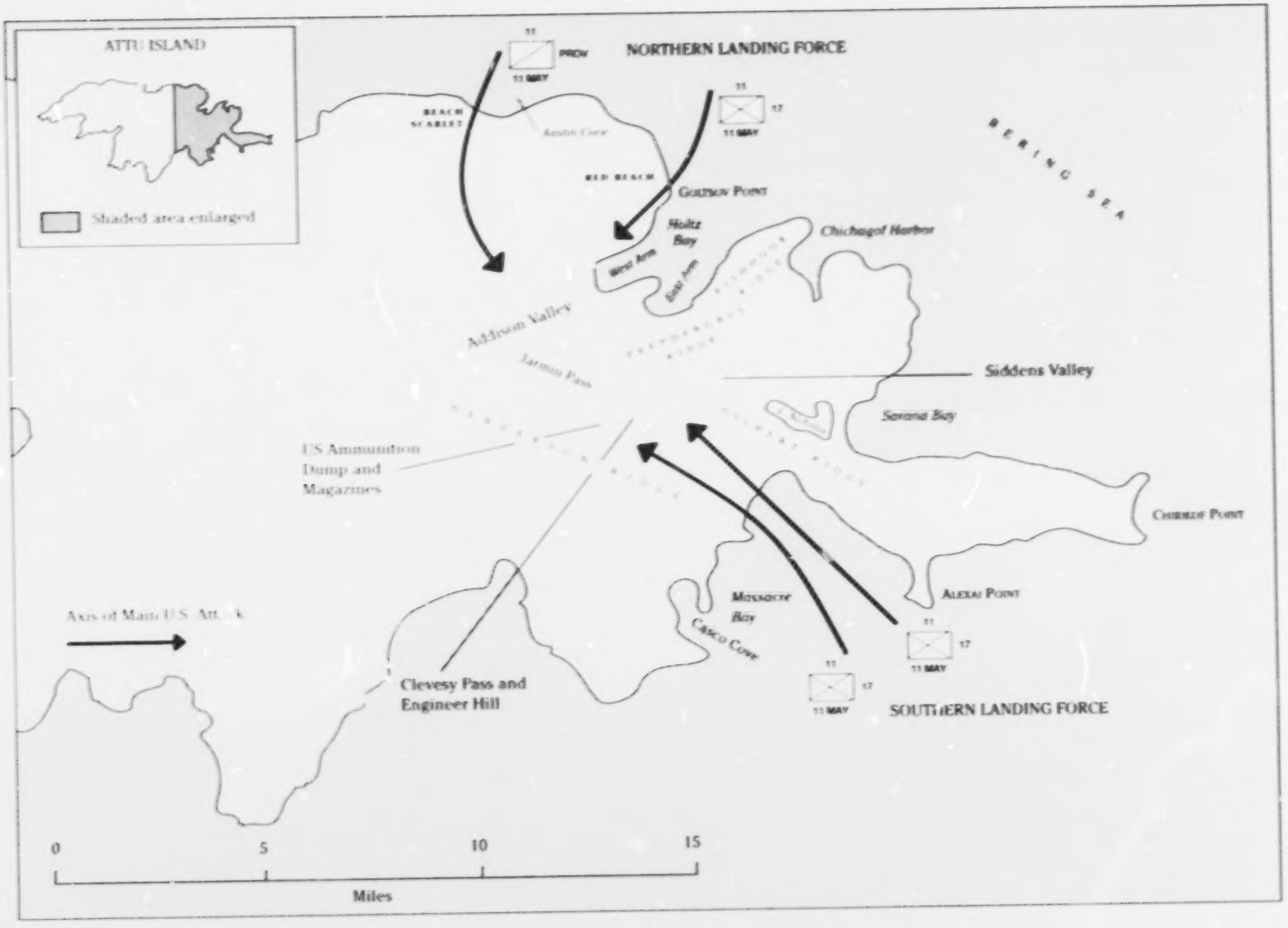

The Capture of Attu, 7th Infantry Division, 11 May 1943. From Stetson Conn, et al., *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*.

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Reading: Attu Battlefield and U.S. Army and Navy Airfields on Attu

Japanese Occupation

In May 1942 Imperial General Headquarters in Tokyo ordered an attack on the Midway Islands, with the objective of occupying those islands and destroying the remnants of the U.S. Pacific Fleet. Japanese plans called for a simultaneous attack on the Aleutian Islands to divert American naval forces from Midway, to protect the Imperial Navy from an attack from the north, and to obstruct communication links between the United States and the U.S.S.R. Having broken Japanese codes, the United States was alert to the forthcoming attacks and proceeded with defense preparations. At that time, its most westerly bases in the Aleutians were the Dutch Harbor Naval Station and the army's Fort Mears at Unalaska Island and a still-secret army airfield on neighboring Umnak Island. The navy also had a 10-man weather station on Kiska Island, Attu's eastern neighbor. Kiska had no native population, but Attu village boasted a strength of 45 Aleuts, a Caucasian school teacher, and the teacher's husband who radioed weather reports to Dutch Harbor.

Japan's plans for the Aleutians called for a carrier air attack on Dutch Harbor and Fort Mears and a hit-and-run assault on Adak Island (which Japan erroneously believed to be fortified) further out on the chain. By means of a separate naval task force, the Japanese also planned the occupation of Kiska and Attu at the end of the Aleutians. The air attacks on Unalaska occurred June 3 and 4, coinciding with the Battle of Midway. When the magnitude of their naval defeat became clear, the Japanese canceled the raid on Adak, but proceeded with the invasions of Kiska and Attu; both were occupied on June 7.

While Japanese naval troops secured Kiska, the Japanese army landed on Attu. The 1,140-man force consisted of infantry, engineers, and a service unit, under the command of Maj. Matsutoshi Hosumi. The Aleuts and their teacher were taken prisoner and eventually removed to Japan. The teacher's husband lost his life in unclear circumstances. At first the Japanese planned to hold the islands only until the onslaught of winter, but soon decided to remain in the Aleutians so as to deny the enemy use of the islands. In mid-August the commander concluded that the Americans were preparing to invade Kiska and decided to move the Attu garrison to that island.

Attu remained unoccupied until the end of October, when fresh troops, including the 303rd Independent Infantry Battalion, arrived from Japan. In April 1943 Col. Yasuyo Yamasaki came by submarine and took command of Attu's growing defenses and partially completed airfield. Despite some increase in American air attacks from newly constructed forward bases (Adak, September 1942; Amchitka, February 1943) and stepped-up American naval activity, Japan succeeded in reinforcing its Aleutian outposts with troops, armament, and supplies until March 1943.

Battle of Komandorski Islands

Determined to interdict Japanese convoys en route to the Aleutians, an American naval task force, led by heavy cruiser *Salt Lake City*, arrived off the Soviet Union's Komandorski Islands west of Attu. On March 26, the ships' radar picked up a column of eight Japanese warships and two transports carrying supplies for the Aleutians. Both sides opened fire simultaneously and there ensued "an old-fashioned long-range ship-to-ship duel that lasted almost four hours."[1] Although each scored hits, the battle ended inconclusively when both forces withdrew. The Americans could savor one aftereffect, however: the Japanese transports hurried home and Japan made no further attempt to reinforce or resupply the Aleutians with surface vessels. From then until the American invasion in May, only submarines succeeded in delivering a trickle of materiel to Attu and Kiska.

Reading: Attu Battlefield and U.S. Army and Navy Airfields on Attu (continued)

Recapture

By early 1943, American planning for the recapture of Kiska had begun in earnest. The army's 7th Infantry Division was chosen as the landing force and trained in amphibious warfare under U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Gen. H. M. "Howling Mad" Smith.[2] In March, however, sufficient naval power was not available to assault the more heavily defended Kiska. In addition, the Japanese were expecting an attack on Kiska. A successful assault on Attu would isolate the Japanese on Kiska between American bases on Attu and Adak and would make Kiska easier to capture. American planners therefore decided to undertake an operation against Attu.

The assault date was set for May 7, 1943, under the command of R. Adm. Thomas C. Kinkaid, North Pacific Force, with R. Adm. Francis W. Rockwell in charge of the amphibious phase and Maj. Gen. Albert E. Brown, 7th Division, assuming command when the troops were established on shore. The battleships *Pennsylvania*, *Idaho*, and *Nevada* provided fire support.

Bad weather postponed the landings until May 11 when both the Northern and Southern Landing Forces headed for shore. The Northern landing took place as planned. At Austin Cove on Attu's north shore, a provisional battalion landed and began a torturous ascent to the passes west of Holtz Bay—a five-day ordeal resulting in many cases of frostbite. At Red Beach, on the northwest shoulder of Holtz Bay, a battalion of the 17th Infantry Regiment and a party of Alaskan scouts landed unopposed. These forces were soon joined by a battalion of the 32nd Infantry Regiment and together the forces drove south toward the Japanese positions at the head of Holtz Bay.

At Massacre Bay, fog delayed the landing of the Southern Force, consisting of two battalions of the 17th Infantry Regiment, until late afternoon. They, too, were unopposed. The Japanese had placed their defenses on the ridges surrounding upper Massacre Valley and were hidden by the fog. By evening, however, both the Northern and Southern forces had come under Japanese fire. By May 13, it was apparent that fierce Japanese resistance had stalemated the Southern Force's advance. The Northern Force was also making slow progress against a stubborn foe. The remainder of the 32nd Infantry Regiment landed that day at Massacre Bay. Later, Alaska's defense force, the 4th Infantry Regiment, also joined the fight. Admiral Kinkaid, convinced that General Brown was bogged down, relieved him and appointed Army Maj. Gen. Eugene M. Landrum to take command on Attu.

For a full week the Japanese prevented the Northern and Southern forces from joining in Jarmin Pass. Then the Japanese began withdrawing slowly toward Chichagof Harbor and its surrounding ridges. Two more weeks of bitter fighting occurred before the 7th Division and its reinforcements succeeded in driving the enemy from the snow-covered cliffs of Fishhook Ridge and Clevesy Pass, which opened the way to Chichagof.

On the night of May 29, the 1,000 surviving able-bodied Japanese made a screaming *banzai* attack out of Chichagof Harbor, up Siddens Valley, toward American positions in Clevesy Pass and against Engineer Hill, killing and being killed. Engineer troops bivouacked on Engineer Hill succeeded in organizing a thin defensive line and breaking the attack. The next morning, May 30, Japan announced the loss of Attu. For many days thereafter, however, American forces continued mopping-up operations.

Casualties were heavy on both sides. Out of a force of about 2,500, only 29 Japanese survived. Of the 15,000 U. S. troops, 550 died and 1,500 were wounded. Another 1,200 Americans were casualties of Attu's climate. Inadequate footgear, in particular, contributed to frozen feet and trenchfoot.

Almost immediately, army engineers and naval seabees began constructing airfields on Attu. Rejecting the Japanese runway at East Holtz Bay as unsatisfactory, army engineers completed a fighter field at West Holtz (Addison Valley) and another on Alexai Point. The latter was soon extended to serve bombers as well.

This student reading was compiled from National Register nomination form "Attu Battlefield and U.S. Army and Navy Airfields on Attu," by Erwin N. Thompson, Historian, Denver Service Center, National Park Service, 1984.

Reading: Attu Battlefield and U.S. Army and Navy Airfields on Attu (continued)

On July 10, 1943, the 11th Air Force made its first attack on Japan's Home Islands. Eight B-25 bombers flew from Attu to strike Paramushiro in the Kuriles. This was the first air attack on Japan since the famous Doolittle raid of April 18, 1942.

Other attacks followed. Most met with some success until September 11, 1943, when a force of 12 B-25 medium bombers and eight B-24 heavy bombers left Attu for Paramushiro. On this occasion, Japanese fire destroyed three bombers. Another seven were heavily damaged and forced to land in Siberia where the crews were interned. Although further raids were postponed for several months, Attu's bombers were again over the Kuriles by spring 1944.

The navy constructed both land runways and a seaplane base for patrol bombers and flying boats west of Massacre Bay and at adjacent Casco Cove. For the duration of the war, naval aircraft made their lonely patrols over the North Pacific. As at Alexai Field, the navy's two land runways were first covered with steel (Marston) mats. By 1944, however, asphalt had been laid and the navy made the runways available to army planes as well as its own, and the 11th Air Force established maintenance facilities there.

As for the Attuan Aleuts, about half of them died while in Japan, mostly from tuberculosis. After Japan's surrender, the survivors, along with the teacher, Mrs. Charles Foster Jones, returned to the United States. Too few in number to begin anew on their island, the Attuans resettled on Atka Island in the Aleutians, together with the inhabitants of that place. The Attuans have not forgotten their homeland. Nor have veterans of the "Forgotten War"—Japanese or American—let Attu slip from their memories.

Notes

1. Paul S. Dull, *A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy (1941–1945)* (Annapolis, 1978), p. 261.

2. General Smith witnessed the 7th Infantry Division's amphibious assault on Attu and wrote, "I have always considered the landing . . . in the dense fog of Attu . . . an amphibious landing without parallel in our military history." Holland M. Smith and Percy Finch, *Coral and Brass* (Washington, 1979), p. 103.

Photo 1

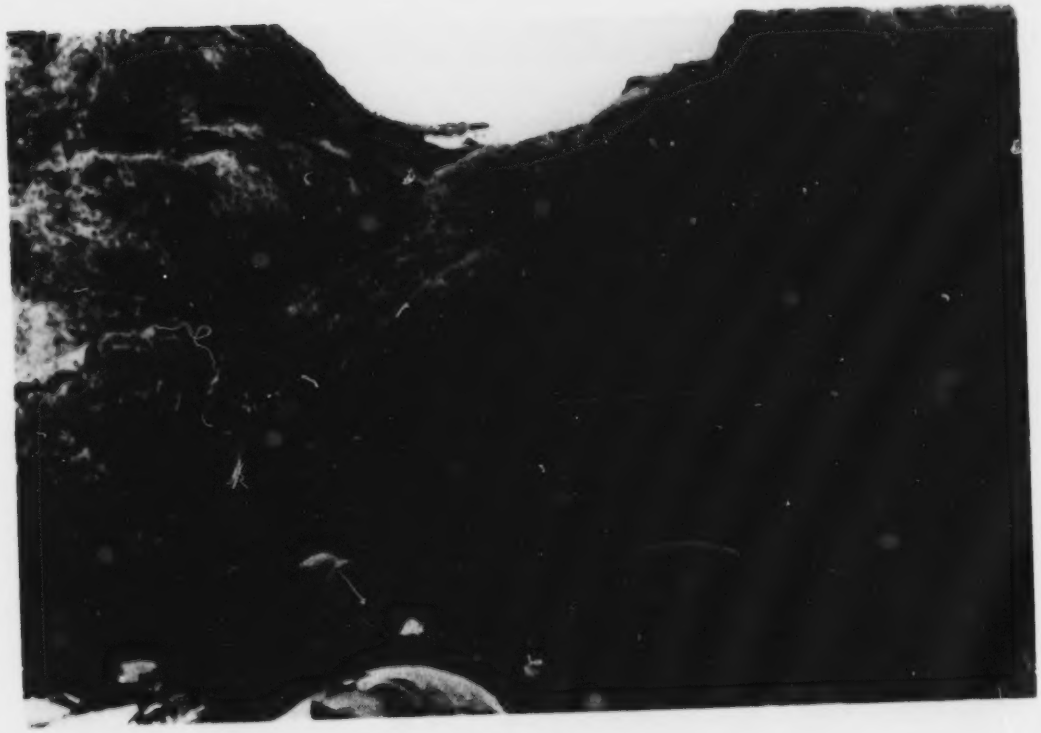

Photo 2

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Photo 3

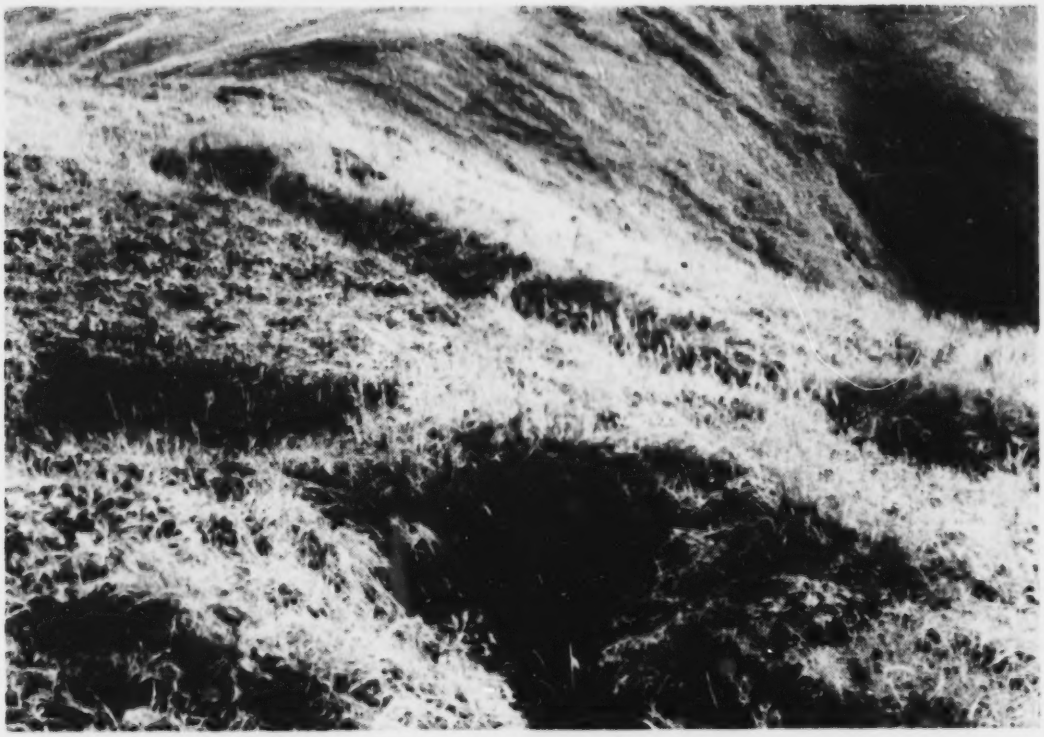

Photo 4

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Photo 5

Photo 6

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PHOTO CAPTIONS

Photo 1. Seventh Infantry Division troops landing at Massacre Bay, Attu, May 1943. Japanese defenses were hidden above the fog line. (Courtesy Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska)

Photo 2. American troops sending supplies to the front lines during the battle for Attu Island, May 1943. Even where the terrain was flat, the soggy tundra could not support heavy vehicles. (Courtesy Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska)

Photo 3. Japanese snow trenches near the top of Fishhook Ridge and overlooking the pass from Holtz Bay to Chichagof Harbor, May 1943. American troops had to climb these snowfields against an unseen enemy. (U.S. Army Signal Corps)

Photo 4. Japanese trenches and foxholes in tundra near Clevesy Pass, Attu, October 1982. [Note the date the photograph was taken. The visibility of the disturbance to the land provides a vivid example of the fragility of the tundra.] (E. M. Thompson)

Photo 5. Ridge between the East Arm of Holtz Bay and Chichagof Bay, Attu, May 31, 1943. Japanese soldiers used hand grenades to commit suicide when it was clear that their final banzai attack on Attu on May 29, 1943, would fail. This photograph shows a group of approximately 40 Japanese soldiers who died in this manner; the rest were killed by Americans. The photo shows just where the soldiers fell. Later these bodies were removed and buried. (U.S. Army Signal Corps)

Photo 6. General Holtz Bay area and beach looking northwest from the top of the ridge separating the east and west arms, June 1943. This photograph was taken after the American occupation. Note the wreckage of the Japanese Zero aircraft on the beach. On the ground just above the beach proper, the Japanese had located a battery of six 70mm duo-purpose, anti-aircraft and field artillery guns. The gun positions and the effective use of camouflage can be seen. Across the creek and to the left of the bridge, Japanese caves and a partially camouflaged building are visible. (U.S. Signal Corps)